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The Haskell Silk Company: Manufacturers of Staple Silks Recognized As a "Standard" in the Trade

by
Jacqueline Field

Haskell Silk Company founder, James Haskell, was a native of the Cape Anne, area of Massachusetts.¹ In this locale his early career included service in numerous public and business capacities, not least as agent for The Rockport Steam Cotton Company, and as a State Senator.² He was a man experienced in politics, finance and textile production. He moved to Maine in 1858 when he acquired the cotton mill at Saccarappa Falls, Westbrook.³ Under his management the mill, renamed The Westbrook Manufacturing Company, flourished and expanded.

In 1874, his elder son, Frank Haskell, assumed the role of agent. At the same time James took advantage of, by now, well developed machine twist-making technology and launched into the youngest branch of the textile industry--silk. The Haskell Silk Company was established as a twist maker in 1874 and incorporated in 1876.⁴ Family money financed the venture forming a closely held corporation, more like a family partnership.⁵ This undoubtedly contributed to the Haskell Silk Company's long term stability--something unusual in the volatile silk industry. In business for more than 50 years (1874-1930) Haskell is one of the few U. S. silk companies with a history spanning the rise and demise of industrial silk manufacture in America.

Of many small New England silk twist mills established at this time Haskell, in Maine, was the most northerly situated. Nevertheless, the Westbrook silk mill was one of the most successful. In competition with much larger twist makers, Haskell held its own in the market place. Haskell twist making progress is detailed in the previously published paper by this author: *Transitions and Expansion: The Haskell Silk Company's Switch from Thread Manufacture to the Production of Yard Goods 1880-1882*.⁶

The focus here is on the Haskell Silk Company's subsequent phase as a silk fabric manufacturer. With its switch to weaving Haskell was in tune with U.S. silk industry developments. Prior to the 1880s American silk manufacture was confined primarily to sewing thread, narrow goods, ribbons, handkerchiefs, fringes and trimmings. Insignificant quantities of dress goods were hand woven. During late 19th century (and earlier) the growing middle-class appetite for consumer goods included a demand for silk

¹ Marshall W.S. Swan, *Town on Sandy Bay. A History of Rockport Massachusetts* (Canaan, New Hampshire: Phoenix Publishers, 1980).

² Ibid.

³ *Westbrook Chronicle* (12, January 1883) n.p. Walker Library, Westbrook; Ownership seems apparent from comments in the only two pieces of extant family correspondence. The unpublished letters are in two separate private collections.

⁴ Certificate of Incorporation. The Haskell Silk Company, 23, November 1876. Maine Office of the Secretary of State, Augusta, Records of Incorporation, Records Vol. 1, page 243.

⁵ There were five Directors: James Haskell, his two sons and two relatives from Rockport.

⁶ Jacqueline Field, "Transitions and Expansion: The Haskell Silk Company's Transition from Thread to Silk Fabric Weaving" in *The Proceedings of the Sixth Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America*, Inc., 1998.

as yet unmet by U.S. manufacturers.⁷ Finally, by 1880 a number of elements combined to make American industrial scale silk fabric production a realistic possibility. Some of the most significant factors were:

- 1) The steady replacement of silk handlooms by power looms specifically developed to suit fine silk fibers.
- 2) A high tariff on imported manufactured silk goods--thus increasing the cost of already expensive foreign silk materials.
- 3) No import tax on raw silk--thus keeping the raw material inexpensive for domestic manufacturers.
- 4) Prospects of increased future supplies of raw silk from Japan.
- 5) Improved transport of Asian raw silk from U.S. Pacific ports to manufacturers in the eastern seaboard.

Through 1881 and into 1882 records show Haskell purchased bales of Chinese, Japanese and Italian raw silk and continued to make threads of various kinds. On March 24th 1882 a journal entry lists the first bolts of silk cloth shipped to the company's New York agent E. A. Kingman & Freeman.⁸ The consignment consisted of 5 pieces of *grosgrain*, a total of 237 yards.⁹ In November the same year the *American Silk Journal* announced that the Haskell Silk Company had discontinued twist manufacture and now had 20 looms running on *grosgrain*. How the transition was accomplished is unknown. In Westbrook, Maine, Haskell throwsters had long experience producing organzine and tram (the warp and filling threads used in silk weaving.) Unlike Southern New England, New York and New Jersey, where the burgeoning silk industry congregated, no convenient pool of immigrant silk weavers existed in the vicinity of this northerly and somewhat isolated silk mill.¹⁰ Haskell weavers were local, as Yankee names in the company Time Book make indisputably clear.¹¹ It is most probable that cotton weavers from the Haskell owned Westbrook Manufacturing Company mastered silk weaving. Instances of workers transferring textile skills from other fibers to silk occurred elsewhere.¹²

If Haskell did not enjoy the advantage of immigrant silk weavers, the company benefited from another form of immigrant "know-how." Haskell recruited necessary expertise--German loom-fixer Ernest Gerhardt in 1883 and in 1884, German dye-master Ernest Rathgreb.¹³ (In the late 19th century Germany was the leading chemical researcher and chemical dye developer.) Gerhardt had experience with silk manufacturer, Cutter of New Jersey and, in due course, became a pillar of the Haskell Company. By 1900, he was in

⁷ Hitherto dress silks were imported from Europe and Asia. Those who could afford to do so traveled to Europe on clothing and silk buying trips.

⁸ Accounts Journal, December, 1874-August, 1882, Page 535, Haskell Silk Co., HBS

⁹ Ibid. A "piece" is the complete length of fabric woven from one warp. At this time a piece averaged 50

¹⁰ The pattern of immigration into Maine during the 1870s was French Canadian. They were agricultural workers without textile skills. However, they formed a vast, available labor pool and as cheap labor they quickly displaced Yankee mill operatives in most of Maine's textile mills, including the largest --Bates, Lewiston, Cabot, Brunswick-Topsam and Pepperell, Biddeford. There are no records from Haskell's cotton plant, The Westbrook Manufacturing Company, to show if French immigrants were employed there

¹¹ Time Book, March 1883-December 1885, Haskell Silk Co.,HBS. Many of the names are still common in the town today. A few French names appear in the 1880s records.

¹² See Jane Wallerstein, *Voices from the Paterson Silk Mills* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Press, 2000).

¹³ Time Book E-2, March 183-December 1885, Haskell Silk Co., HBS.

charge of what was known as the "upstairs room."¹⁴ Based on photographs of machinery located on the upper mill floor, this means Gerhardt was responsible for supervising throwing, quilling, skein, bobbin winding and warp beam preparation.

Fragmentary records provide some details of rates of pay rates during the early weaving years. In the mid-1880's mill Superintendent E. Fenton, drew a salary of \$125.00 per month.¹⁵ Monthly remuneration for the Treasurer, Agent and General Manager--respectively James' nephew William Poole, elder son Frank and younger son Edwin--was \$100.00 each.¹⁶ Dyemaster Rathgreb, at an average of almost \$90.00 and loom-fixer Gerhardt approximately \$70.00 per month were the highest paid employees.¹⁷ Weavers, apparently all female, were paid between eighty-five cents and one dollar a day.¹⁸ The volume of work fluctuated seasonally and the number of days worked per month varied considerably. The maximum possible monthly weaver's wage appears to be \$25.00. For the month of April 1885 Annie Gilbert earned \$19.00, but four dollars were deducted for "a bad warp."¹⁹ In May Josephine Landry had fifty cents deducted for a "short edge."²⁰ Fines were generally between ten and sixty cents and not very frequent. Some deductions were due to worker's receiving an advance earlier in the month. Still others were like Nellie Bryant's. Nellie opted to have her \$19.70 June earnings reduced to \$9.25 because she took the balance in silk fabric.²¹ For blocks of several months at a time, about a third to a half of the women were employed "picking." Pay was by the yard. From amounts listed it is clear that this tedious eye straining work generated wages equal to, and sometimes more than, those earned for weaving.

A photograph dated 1889 shows Haskell operatives formally assembled outside the now much enlarged silk mill.²² The clapboard structure contrasts with the older bell-towered brick cotton mill complex on the opposite side of the river. With its basement, two other stories and large top floor windows the wooden silk mill structure now accommodated 100 looms.²³ For the next decade, through the turn of the century, this mill produced silk dress fabrics that earned the Haskell Company its reputation. Further expansion necessitated a move. In 1902 a new two-story, electrically powered brick and stone mill was constructed upriver on a new site--but still in Westbrook. With 250 looms and over 200 workers the new mill more than doubled weaving capacity and moved the Haskell Silk Company into the ranks of larger, above averaged-sized, silk manufacturers.²⁴ Compared to major cotton and woolen mills Haskell's 250 looms and 5,000 spindles

¹⁴ *Portland Evening Express and Advertiser*, September 19, 1923 Clipping File #17, 19. Walker Library, Westbrook.

¹⁵ General Accounts, 1887-1903, Haskell Silk Co., HBS.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*; Frank presumably also received a salary for his work as Agent for the cotton mill.

By 1904 company principals drew \$208.00 per month

¹⁷ Time Book, March 1883-1885, Haskell Silk Co., HBS.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.* The fact that few workers purchased silk signifies that silk was still regarded as special and expensive. After the turn of the century this changed.

²² St Hyacinth's Historical Society Collection, Westbrook.

²³ Davidson's Textile, *The "Blue Book"* 2nd. Annual Edition, 1889, p. 66

²⁴ *The Blue Book Textile Directory*, Traveller's Edition: 16th Annual Edition, 1903-4, p. 289.

seem unimpressive. For the most part, however, silk mills were not massive. A few employed 500-1000 workers while others required only a handful.

Different silk plants manufactured different products. Some made threads for weaving. Others concentrated on sewing and machine twist threads. Fabric weaving specialties ranged from plain silk staples to cotton-silk mixes, fancy weaves to jacquards, trimmings to ribbons. Hosiery and knits formed a niche of their own. Other silk businesses provided printing, dyeing and finishing services. Most frequently agents handled sales and marketing.

Haskell was one of the vertically integrated silk manufacturers.²⁵ All processes were carried out at Westbrook. From bales of (predominantly) Japanese raw silk shipped north to Haskell from New York importers Morimuri and Arai and others, veteran Haskell throwsters manufactured threads.²⁶ Under dye master Rathgreb's supervision skeins were dyed to pure-dye standards resulting in first class threads without any unnecessary weighting.²⁷ Gerhardt oversaw yarns wound onto warp beams and quills while looms were readied for weavers to set to work. Finally, before leaving the mill, these pure dye silks passed through finishing processes designed to impart the appropriate degree of gloss, crispness or soft drape.²⁸

The Haskell Silk Company avoided the perils of unpredictable fashion. The company manufactured large runs of conservative perennially popular staple silks: plain taffeta, changeable taffeta, taffeta plaids, jasper, grosgrain, faille, duchesse satin, peau de soie, peau de cyne, messaline, surah, armure, tie and lining silks.²⁹ Black was a specialty. By the mid-1880's Haskell eschewed agents and middlemen and maintained a showroom at 74 Worth Street, New York.³⁰ Goods were sold direct to the retail trade.³¹ In this way Haskell was able to provide consumers with consistently high quality staples at very keen prices.

Competition was cut throat. By the late 1890s small town department stores were able to offer middle-class shoppers as many as one or two thousand U.S-made silk fabrics of different weaves, weights and colors.³² In such a world well priced reliable quality silks might be expected to meet success. According to old Westbrook newspapers and other local reports, Haskell fabrics were more than successful--they were recognized as a

²⁵Other integrated companies include Cheney Brothers of Connecticut and Pelgram and Meyer of Paterson, New Jersey--both much larger than the Haskell Silk Company.

²⁶ General Accounts, January 1904-December 1918, page 168, The Haskell Silk Co., HBS.

²⁷ At this time silk was dyed in skeins and silk fabric was woven from colored threads. It was during the dye process that various substances might be added to weight silk. On the one hand this extended or made silk go further but on the other it weakened the fiber, reducing the lasting properties by causing a variety of problems from splitting to flaking. Piece dyeing did not come into common use until the 1920s.

²⁸ Many companies contracted dyeing and finishing out to specialists. In contrast, Haskell not only did its own dyeing; the finishing was also completed on site. *Portland Board of Trade Journal*. 1903, p. 354.

²⁹ Fabrics listed in various Haskell advertisements and sales.

³⁰ Over the years Haskell occupied showrooms at various New York addresses.

³¹ *The Haskell Silk Mills. Westbrook Businessmen and Businesses 1900-1909*. Article in Red Clipping Binder, p.42. Walker Library, Westbrook.

³² J. R. Libby Company, Portland Maine, Mail Order Catalogue No.3. Autumn-Winter 1899-1900.

"standard" in all parts of America and sold in every town. These boasts might seem to be an exaggerated, but understandable, manifestation of community pride in a local industry. However, information recently found in a trade journal substantiates the claims.

For reasons too complex to discuss here, *The American Silk Journal* commissioned a *Consumer Report*-type study to compare imported and American-made silks.³³ The results, published in *The American Silk Journal*, October 1894, showed the American specimens to be unequivocally superior. In the final paragraph the article states that:

. . . in the tests of American [versus] foreign fabrics made by Professor Dean, the domestic silks employed were from the Haskell Silk Company of Westbrook, Maine, widely known as large producers of honest durable American . . . silks . . . including . . . various weaves in both black and colors of *absolutely* pure dye silk.³⁴

This explains how Haskell silk fabrics garnered their reputation as the "standard." It also gave the company name recognition, something unusual and hard for a staple manufacturer to achieve at this time. The report inevitably influenced sales because silk buyers, silk salesmen and silk fabric store clerks read it. Discovery of an offprint of the article, with a cover prepared by Haskell to draw attention to the findings shows that the company made good use of the report as a marketing tool.

The other seemingly exaggerated local Westbrook legend--that Haskell silk was sold "in every town"--is born out by a newly discovered Journal of Sales. The Journal covers the 18 years between 1889 and 1907. Hundreds of pages of entries confirm sales of bolts of silk, if not in every town, in a remarkable number across the country. The encyclopedic list of customers, includes familiar eastern seaboard stores such as Jordan Marsh of Boston and Macy's, New York, mid-western stores such as The Denver Dry Goods Store, Chicago's Carson, Pirie and Scott, and the names of countless other stores, yet to be pinpointed geographically. Other than in trade journals Haskell did not advertise. To judge from a Haskell line of silks called "Cashmere Peerless" manufactured specially for the J. R. Libby & Co. Department Store it seems possible that Haskell promoted the company product by supplying stores with their own "house brand."³⁵ Haskell enjoyed name recognition well into the twentieth century. J. R. Libby's catalogues listed Haskell silks by name at the turn of the century.³⁶ In 1913 Macy's, New York, featured a special display of Haskell silks.³⁷ An illustrated store advertisement for "Expensive Haskell & Cheney Bros. silk suits" appeared in a 1916 newspaper.³⁸

More often than not, at this time, silk manufacturer's names remained anonymous. In the staple market selvedge marking was not yet very prevalent. At best, a bolt carried a

³³ *American Silk Journal*. (October 1894); Note: Competition from foreign silks was a complex political issue. Not all poor quality silks were foreign. At this time some U.S. manufacturers turned out inferior quality, heavily weighted silks.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ J. R. Libby Company, Portland Maine, Mail Order Catalogue No.3. Autumn-Winter 1899-1900.

³⁶ J. R. Libby Company,. Mail order catalogues Autumn-Winter 1898-1899 and 1899-1900.

³⁷ *American Silk Journal* (January, 19130): 58.

³⁸ Rines Bros. Co. *Portland Evening Express and Advertiser*, 29 June 1916: n.p.

paper label with the maker's name. Once the fabric was cut up and distributed the identity was lost unless the consumer made a record. Thus, despite the vast quantities made and sold it is virtually impossible today to attribute extant silk fabric to specific manufacturers. As a result, to date, the Haskell story is a history in search of artifacts. Two examples provide the only glimpses of Haskell products identified to date. One is a cream duchesse satin wedding dress worn by James Haskell's granddaughter, Mabel Haskell, in 1912.³⁹ The other is a 1916 mulberry-colored taffeta dress and coat ensemble believed to have belonged to Mrs. G. Gray, a resident of Westbrook.⁴⁰ Before their present storage, both articles endured long periods of neglect in less than ideal conditions. Both fabrics survived, maintained a fine lustrous appearance and show no signs of splitting or deterioration, as might be expected of pure-dye Haskell silk.

During the immediate post-war years and the 1920s complex issues generated serious problems throughout the entire silk industry. Because no Haskell documents pertaining to 1920-1930 have yet been found, events presented here are pieced together entirely from newspaper accounts, trade directories and journals. Company reorganization in 1922 cut the number of Directors from five to three, reduced the capital invested and broke the tradition of exclusive Haskell/Westbrook ownership.⁴¹ Thomas J. Arnold of Paterson, New Jersey, was the new President with Edwin Haskell as Vice-President.⁴² Arnold's tenure turned out to be short. He resigned in 1925.⁴³ This move presumably reduced company capital even further--at a time when an infusion was needed to update equipment.

From its beginnings Haskell was successful as a manufacturer of reasonably priced conservative staples--the fabrics most popular with the average American woman. At this time, however, demand for traditional Haskell-type staples waned before new sport silk fabrics and the encroachment of artificial silks.⁴⁴ This market change inevitably exacerbated the company's problems. Haskell ran well below capacity in the early 1920s. Despite exigencies output during the late twenties included some innovative silk-rayon mixes with "Imitation Brocade" effects and commission woven rayons for other companies.⁴⁵ In 1927, symptomatic of difficulties, there was a walk out and closure.⁴⁶ Where the silk industry at large was long ridden with and is remembered for labor problems--it is notable that this was the only strike in Haskell Company history. Two years later, on the 5th of December 1930, The Haskell Silk Company ceased

³⁹ Maine Historical Society Costume Collection, Portland, Maine.

⁴⁰ Collection of the Victoria Mansion, Portland, Maine.

⁴¹ Unidentified newspaper clipping dated 3 August, 1922. Clipping File #15/84. Walker Library,

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ *Portland Evening Express*. 1 October, 1925. Clipping File #15/84. Walker Library, Westbrook.

⁴⁴ For information about the development of "sport silk" see Jacqueline Field, "Dyes, Chemistry and Clothing: The Influence of World War One on Fabrics, Fashions and Silk" in *Dress The Annual Journal of the Costume Society of America*. 28 (2001): 77-91.

⁴⁵ *American Silk Journal* (July, 1927):71

⁴⁶ Newspaper account, July 11, 1927. Paper unidentified. Clipping File #9,112. Walker Library, Westbrook

production.⁴⁷ A 1933 attempt to revive Haskell with Reconstruction Finance Corporation aid was not successful.⁴⁸

The silk industry demise is the subject of another paper. It is more fitting to conclude by recalling The Haskell Silk Company hey days and summing up what made the company successful and what made Haskell silks special. First, success stemmed partly from the involved local ownership and stable workforce and partly from James Haskell's establishment of shrewd financial, production and marketing practices. Integrated production meant quality was controlled from first to last step in production. Staples assured a steady market and direct selling contained prices. Second, the silks were special because they were pure-dye. Such silks did not deteriorate. Haskell fabrics represented the best of affordable American industrially produced staple silks.⁴⁹ Consequently, in the turn-of-the-century decades from Maine to California working and ordinary middle-class women confidently invested hard-earned wages and modest dress budgets in attractive, reliable Haskell silks.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Portland (Maine) Evening Express and Advertiser, December 11, 1930. Clipping File #8, 89. Walker Library, Westbrook.

⁴⁸ Unidentified, undated Newspaper clipping. Private Collection.

⁴⁹ In the early 1900s American mass-produced silks sold for between 75 cents and \$3.00 per yard--inexpensive for a fabric previously classed as a luxury--but not cheap compared to attractive cotton priced at 5 or 10 cents per yard.

⁵⁰ On affordable silks, see Jacqueline Field, "Silk and Style: Affording American Machine-Made Silks at the Turn of the Twentieth Century" in *Dress*, The Annual Journal of the Costume Society of America. 26 (1999): 47-57.